

AMERICA ON THE WAY

By C. VANN WOODWARD

HOW are American historians, social scientists, and novelists to cope with the vastness and complexity of American democracy? Are they more bold than wise in attempting what European writers have rarely ventured—a composite picture of a continental area? How much reality is there in an average man? In a composite community? Do the regionalists provide an answer or an evasion? A step forward or a step backward? Are there other possible answers? Each of the books under consideration here has its own answers to these questions.

America in Midpassage. By Charles A. and Mary R. Beard. New York: The Macmillan Company. \$3.50. *American Social Problems.* By Howard W. Odum. New York: Henry Holt and Company. \$4.00. *These Are Our Lives.* Edited by W. T. Couch. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press. \$2.00.

Regardless of the fact that Charles and Mary Beard's "America in Midpassage" is printed as the third volume of a series, it is in many ways unique—not only among their works, but in American historiography. No other decade in American history, so far as I am aware, has been chronicled at its very close with such thoroughness, skill, and authority.

While not uncritical of New Deal leadership, the Beards are frank in their praise of New Deal domestic policy. Franklin D. Roosevelt, they conclude, combines in his thinking "the two most powerful tendencies in American history"; that is to say that he combines "the severe economic analysis of the Hamilton-Webster tradition with the humanistic democracy of the parallel tradition." With regard to the Roosevelt foreign policy the conclusions are of quite a different order. Back of the Beards' stinging rebukes of New Deal adventures in world politics there is a sense of urgent concern for the immediate future, plus a burning conviction that American democracy should not attempt "to settle the difficult problems of European nations encrusted in the heritages of their long and sanguinary history." Against the "world imagists" of all varieties, whether Lodge-Mahan capitalist imperialists, Cobden-Wilson-Hull free traders, or international Marxists, the Beards take their stand.

The chapters on cultural history, making up virtually half the huge book, are perhaps the most impressive in the volume. No cultural artifact, whether unearthed in Hollywood or Harvard, goes unrelated to the humanist criterion of man as the measure of all things, and the common root of them all is traced back to the humble soil of social needs. It is not conceded that even the most aloof professors "excogitated their premises and syllogisms wholly within ivory towers." The findings of the Beards indicate that American arts, science, and letters under the stress of a period of social crisis and upheaval all achieved a new and deeper integration with the realities of American society.

In all their log of the stormy "Midpassage," full as it is of

mutiny, piracy, and aimless drifting, the Beards betray few if any real qualms of pessimism about the future or any lack of hope for a happy landing. It is the same optimism that suffuses their earlier volumes, one that I associate with the Columbia school of social thought from Giddings and Robinson on down. It is true that in the post-depression editions of the first two volumes of "The Rise of American Civilization" that glowing conclusion about "the dawn, not the dusk of the gods" was replaced by something a bit vaguer. And in this third volume the optimistic title of the series is relegated to microscopic type on the title page. Still the new title, "America in Midpassage," implies a course steered, an eventual landing.

A comparison of the underlying assumptions of Howard W. Odum's "American Social Problems" with those of the Beards' book reveals a striking contrast. The comparison might also help explain the feeling I sometimes had while reading the Beards, that American culture is something produced in New York, and American politics something determined in Washington. To Mr. Odum, the regionalist, "regionalism appears as a very realistic economy through which decentralization and equilibrium may be maintained in a world almost universally characterized as tending too much toward super-urbanization, bigness and technological centralization." The Beards, on the other hand, cheerfully predict that another fifty years of technological progress will "almost complete the destruction of that picture of the world" based on regional organization. It seems that bathtubs are being made from surplus milk and silken purses from cornstalks—or vice versa. The Beards maintain that "the theory that there was a natural division of labor among regions and nations according to climate and resources was certainly a distorted view of reality." Now that assumption is an important part of the Beard "frame of reference"—and it is a pretty large assumption. If the assumption is correct, then their "continentalism" follows as the night the day,

their historical method is vindicated above all others—and the Beards, like all good logicians, have got everything out of their major premise they put into it. If the premise is not correct, then the regionalists should have a hearing.

According to Mr. Odum and the regionalists, “ideology is not enough; action is not enough; audacity is not enough.” There must also be information—“a colossal preliminary work preparatory to the new social reconstruction”—information “not only by totals and averages, but by regional distributions.” A continental area, where no two great regions are alike, is too vast to be comprehended in averages. “The nation is so complex in its historical and cultural backgrounds and in its present situations that there can be no average man or composite community.” “Middletown” is not enough, then, and perhaps *national* history is not enough. As to the means of interpreting culture and history within the region, Mr. Odum is vaguer than the Beards. Discarding the “older theories” of economic, geographic, or biological determinism, he substitutes “societal determinism” as the “primary influence upon society.” Now this doubtless means something to the sociologist, but to the layman it sounds suspiciously like a tautology.

Mr. Odum has discovered “the new realism of the people,” and like the Beards, he adheres to a humanism that makes man the measure of all things. He believes that in our time “the mass man, the whole real people, approximate an accession to social power such as has not hitherto been recorded in the annals of man.”

The first prize for a new realism of the people, however, goes to Mr. W. T. Couch, who edited “These Are Our Lives.” Here are thirty-five life histories “as told by the people and written by members of the Federal Writers Project” in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Georgia. This represents a completely new technique of regional portraiture—so new, in fact, that there is no name for it. It is neither fiction nor biography, neither history nor sociology;

yet it combines all these techniques and reveals truths inaccessible to any one of them alone. The editor's "Instructions to Writers" cautions them to "write what you smell, see, hear."

The living stuff of history is in these stories—annals of the poor that are neither short nor simple. A life that embraces memories of a self-sufficient mountain farm, a job in one of the first factories of the 'eighties (when work began and ended by lamplight and wages were ten to twenty-five cents a day), and includes the W. P. A., cannot be very simple. No one can label these stories sentimental propaganda who has read of the curb-hopping blonde to whom "the Y's heaven compared to being stuck in the country," the cotton picker who rose to be a lady's maid, or the anti-union worker who "likes working for a Christian factory."

Mr. Couch's pioneer work more than justifies his belief that "the method here used has certain possibilities and advantages which should no longer be ignored."